

Dr. Cogswell's Address

TO THE

CANDIDATES

FOR

DEGREES AND LICENSES,

IN THE

MEDICAL INSTITUTION OF YALE COLLEGE,

JANUARY, 21, 1846.



THE
ANNUAL ADDRESS
TO THE
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ADDRESS.

FROM an early age of the world to the present time, there has ever been set apart a class of men, whose appropriate business and duty it was to watch over and guard the public health ; and although in the earlier days of man's existence, they were without education, they nevertheless occupied a commanding position in society, possessed a powerful influence, and did much in forming the character of the community in which they lived. It was believed that whatever skill they possessed was by virtue of a peculiar gift, and that by this gift, a few charmed drugs, and certain incantations, they wielded a superhuman power over life and death, and hence they were regarded as public benefactors. The untutored savage of North America, even at this day, has his "medicine man," who is believed to possess this peculiar gift, is regarded, with a kind of superstitious veneration, as a being superior to those around him, is consulted on all occasions, and exerts a mighty influence on the tribe to which he belongs. Long since, however, in all civilized nations, has the power to heal diseases ceased to be considered as a gift, but is acknowledged to be an acquirement—an acquirement of the highest order—one that has engaged the best energies of some of the noblest minds the world has ever produced. As civilization and the refinement of society advance, more and more by way of acquirement is demanded of him who offers himself to the pub-

lic as a physician. He must have a full stock of general learning, and his professional education must be complete ; he must have spent long years in arduous study and patient investigation, with private and public teachers of acknowledged merit, and pass the ordeal of a rigid examination, before he will be received by the public as one duly qualified to discharge the manifold duties of his profession.

Now, gentlemen, as you offer yourselves as candidates for the honors of this time honored Institution, it is to be inferred that you are thus prepared, that you have complied with all the forms of study, and will be found duly qualified for admission into the medical family. This is an era in your lives of intense interest. Your relations to society are now about to be changed. You have thus far been the recipients only, of favors and benefits ; all that anxious parents, kind friends and faithful teachers could do to qualify you to enter, honorably, one of the learned professions, has been done ; the vast store of medical learning has been thrown open for your improvement ; and if you on your part have been zealous, industrious and faithful students, we are bound to believe that you are fully prepared for this change in your relations to those around you. Thus far in your life all has been sun shine ; you have had the approving smile of friends, and the companionship of your fellow students, with a generous emulation among yourselves, to cheer you on in the pursuit of your studies, and make your task easy and your burden light. But the halcyon days of your pilgrimage are now past, and you are about to enter upon the sober realities of professional life. You are about to take upon yourselves new duties, new and weighty responsibilities, to which you have hitherto been strangers. You are now to become dispensers of good, guardians of the public health, and are to render your services to a society, of whose real character you must, in a great measure at least, be ignorant. You have yet seen little of man, save his fair exterior, and are ill qualified to judge of the heart by what appears on the outside. A few years in the practice of

your profession will enable you to see man as he is, and to judge of his true character. The profession you have chosen is one full of perplexity, toil and anxiety ; it has too, its bright spots ; it may and will at times afford you a higher degree of satisfaction, than any other profession or calling in which the physical and mental energies of man can be enlisted.

You are not to suppose that you will be exempt from disappointments and discouragements ; they are the common lot of man, and to no class of men are they so common, as to the young men in our profession. You will serve a capricious and ungrateful public, who know little how to appreciate your worth, your labors, your anxieties and your responsibilities. You will often find your best efforts and your severest labors repaid with coldness, neglect, and ingratitude.

You commence your professional labors at an age of the world when quackery overspreads the land, and pervades every class of community. Turn which way you will, nostrums, panaceas and catholicons will stare you in the face, and often you will find your best exertions thwarted by the stealthy introduction of some secret medicine ; and if perchance you shall be so fortunate as to rescue from impending death, in the hands of some bold empiric, any quack-loving patient, and restore him again to health, be not disappointed if, when he shall no longer need your aid, he turns his back upon you, pays your reasonable bills grudgingly, or not all, and again goes forth to herald the praises of quackery. It will be the part of wisdom to bear all these things with patience and an unruffled temper. If you suffer your equanimity to be so far disturbed, as to betray you into a noisy controversy with empiricism, you will find yourselves warring with an intangible and soulless foe, that has nothing to lose ; and if victory perches upon your standard, it will be without its laurels. If this love of the marvelous, this belief in the existence of a universal remedy, was confined to the low and the vulgar, there would be less cause to blush for the inconsistency and credulity of man ; but unhappily such is not the case.

There may be found learned counsellors and eloquent divines, who would denounce all irregularity in every thing but in medicine, who are as ready to lend their names and their influence to give currency to the nostrums of the day, as any other class of the community. It is but reasonable, when faithful service has been rendered, and the sick healed, to expect a reward, at least of gratitude ; but in this you will often be disappointed, and instead thereof, find yourselves repaid with neglect, your motives called in question, and pecuniary compensation denied, or paid only by compulsion. But be not alarmed or discouraged, for you are only treading the path of those who have gone before you in the profession.

I have presented some of the dark features in the life of a physician, and there are many others yet untold ; but there is a counterpoise for them all—there are brighter spots in this dark picture. The faithful and skillful practitioner receives daily compensation, of which the ingratitude or caprice of men cannot deprive him, in the proud consciousness of discharging his duty to his fellow men, in the spirit of our Saviour's golden rule, "to do unto others as we would that others should do unto us." There are other modes by which he receives a compensation as he goes along. To a mind that has been disciplined by thorough education and habits of industry, there is no greater enjoyment than may be derived from close study, patient investigation and critical observation, and more especially when research has for its object some great and practical good.

To become rich by your profession you need not ordinarily expect. Few of our profession have ever accumulated great estates ; and here let me say to you, if you are impelled to action by no higher or better motives than the love of lucre, you have sadly mistaken your calling, for there is scarcely any trade or business that will not, with equal exertion and capital, yield a better pecuniary reward. If the holy flame of charity and pure benevolence is burning brightly in your bosoms, pecuniary reward will be a remote and contingent object. You will derive

much greater satisfaction from your mental employment, and in doing good to those around you ; the principle of “ good will to men,” will become a prominent feature in your character, will sink deep in your hearts, and take possession of your inmost soul. You will in your business be likely to find full scope for the exercise of the principle of benevolence ; for no class of men are called upon and expected to perform so much service, without the hope of pecuniary reward, as physicians. The poor we have with us always ; and from their destitute condition, from the want of the many comforts and necessities of life enjoyed by the more fortunate, and from their greater exposure to the inclemencies of the seasons, they become peculiarly a prey to disease. In this condition they have strong and urgent claims upon our sympathy and charity, and we are morally bound to render them that service, which they cannot ask or expect to receive at the hands of any other class of their fellow men. I do not mention this because I consider it a tax or a burden, but to warn you of what you may expect to meet in your profession, and to exhort you to discharge this part of your duty cheerfully, and with the strictest fidelity. This service, viewed in its proper light, instead of being a burden, is a favor ; for your reward, in gratitude and blessings, will be greater than you are accustomed to derive from any other service, or to receive from any other quarter. You will also derive greater satisfaction from the reflection that you have discharged your whole duty toward this worthy but unfortunate class of your fellow men, and that without the hope or expectation of pecuniary reward. You will too have your reward in that satisfaction that is sure to flow from an approving conscience, and you may look with confidence for the smiles of Heaven—for, “ inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me.” Then let benevolence be a prominent feature in your character as physicians and as men.

To become extensively useful, it is all important to the physician, and to those with whom his destinies are linked, that he possess a character for influence, and that this influence be exercised in a spirit of benevolent humanity, for the well being of all who may come within its reach. The forming of your character is peculiarly your own work, it cannot be done by another. Although the profession is stripped of the mystery in which it was formerly shrouded, and he who practices it is not supposed to possess any super-human power, yet the position he occupies in society is such as to give him a commanding influence, an influence that may and will be exerted for the weal or woe of that people with whom providence shall cast his lot. The good man and the skillful physician cannot possess too much weight of character, too much influence with his fellow men. If he would possess this quality of character in an eminent degree, he must acquire a perfect self-control, a stern and imperturbable equanimity of temper, never suffering himself to be thrown off his guard, never losing his balance, let what will come.

The maintenance of becoming dignity will also contribute largely to this end. Independence, properly tempered, discretely and judiciously exercised, together with a firmness, rarely if ever called to his aid in matters of little moment, and never yielding in matters of importance, but to the voice of sound reason and convincing argument, will also give him a desirable consequence with his fellow men. Added to the above considerations, an affable, easy, amiable and gentlemanly deportment, together with the advantages derived from his position in society, and his daily intercourse with all classes of community, will be sure to clothe the physician with all the influence he can desire to enjoy.

Thus armed with a control over your own acts, and over the acts of others, you will have committed to your charge the power to do much good or evil; and let me remind you, my young brethren, that you will be held to a strict accountability for the manner in which you use this power, or this talent, com-

mitted to your keeping. You must answer for it at the unerring tribunal of public opinion, and there will rest on you a still more fearful accountability to Him who has conferred on you the power.

It is an error very common to young men entering upon our profession, to believe that they have acquired knowledge enough—enough for every exigency; that they have a plaster for every sore, a remedy for every disease that flesh is heir to; that they are fully armed and equipped to combat disease in all its forms, and even to wage a successful war with the king of terrors. If this shall happen to be your case, you will soon find that you have over-estimated your powers; that diseases will not always as readily retire at your approach as you may anticipate, or desire, but that they will often resist the most skillful application of any and all the remedies you may possess. You will often find your best efforts powerless, and death will irrevocably fix his seal upon the lips of your patient. It is here, perhaps, that you may first become sensible that your stock of professional learning is yet imperfect, and first see the importance of extending your researches, and adding constantly to your resources. If you would be respectable practitioners through life, you will find it indispensable that you devote a portion of your time to reading, not only medicine as it was, but medicine as it is—possessing yourself of all the discoveries and improvements of the age in which you live. If you would be eminent in your profession, you must cultivate a love for it; the various duties of study and practice must be performed with a cheerful and hearty good will; for if these duties are performed of necessity, not from choice, it will all be an up-hill business, and you will never reach the goal of your ambition. If you would be eminent, you must bear in mind that you have merely begun your mental training, that you have only learned the first principles of medicine, that you have just stepped upon the threshold of the science, and that to insure success in your undertaking, you need a steady and untiring perseverance.

All may attain to a certain degree of eminence : and this is of the utmost importance to you ; for the eminent physician has decided advantages. Business seeks and finds him ; his services are acknowledged to be valuable ; and in rendering them he is considered as conferring a favor, and from this circumstance he is better remunerated. The moderate man, on the contrary, has to seek business, and is not always successful in finding it ; while the employer considers that he confers a favor when he gives business to the man who stands at or below mediocrity, whether he pays him or not. Then to acquire a full stock of medical knowledge, and some degree of professional eminence, is a duty you owe to yourselves, no less than to the community over whose health you may be called to preside.

Another error to which young men are particularly prone, involving a greater degree of moral obliquity than the last, is in the comparative estimate which they put upon their own abilities and acquirements—often thinking and speaking diminutively of others, for the purpose of giving to themselves a higher comparative standing, a greater relative consequence. On this point I would advise that you tread lightly upon the ashes of the illustrious dead of our profession, and that you compare yourselves with all becoming modesty with the living ; never arrogating to yourselves a greater share of astuteness, skill, and medical science, than you are willing to accord to others equally meritorious. I have often thought that too little respect was paid to the memory of the pioneers in the healing art ; that too light an estimate was put upon their professional labors and character. Much that has been taught to you was once their property, and by them used in behalf of suffering humanity. They took medicine from a mere juggling art, and erected out of it a respectable science. They laid out the way, and cleared off the rubbish, by which you now enjoy smooth roads to professional eminence. Although they were destitute of the opportunities and privileges which we enjoy ; although they had to contend against popular prejudice, and labored under manifold embar-

rassments; still their zeal was ardent, their industry untiring, and their benevolence unbounded. They had few facts in medicine from which to reason; but they made the most of the light they possessed, established many new facts, and added them to the scanty list; did much by way of exploring the vast, and till then unknown field of medical science; made many and valuable discoveries, and erected many landmarks to warn their successors of lurking dangers, and direct them in the path of safety. But the chart is yet imperfect, much of it is blank, and remains to be filled up. This is appropriately your work; and if you shall, in your day and generation, do as much to elevate the science, as much for the cause of benevolence and humanity, as they have done, you will have no cause to blush when your past life shall come up in review before you.

In respect to the living, I would recommend that you take good care to secure to yourselves the good will, and thereby the good offices, of your senior brethren. They have the power to do you good, and you will often stand in need of their countenance and kind offices; you will often want to divide with them responsibilities greater than you can bear with safety to your own character. Then seek a frank, free, generous and manly intercourse with them, and court their friendship, to secure which nothing is necessary but to extend to them that courtesy and confidence to which they are entitled at your hands; never harboring jealousies, and never practicing any of those little paltry arts and tricks, which have so often been practiced by unworthy brethren, to supplant those whose characters and services might seem to stand in their way. I will not here attempt to enumerate all the little meannesses that may be, and often have been, practiced for mischievous and wicked purposes, for they are legion, and will full readily enough suggest themselves to your consideration as you go along. I have adverted to them only to warn you against calling them to your aid; to warn you, that although they may at times seem to give you an advantage, and exalt your reputation—as you live, an advantage

thus gained will be temporary, and a reputation thus acquired will be evanescent as a dream, involving you in lasting disgrace, and leaving you to reap a bitter harvest in the scorn and contempt of every honorable brother. Then let your intercourse with your brethren be high minded and honorable, for "such measure as you mete," will be sure one day to be "measured to you again."

Yet another besetting infirmity of young men is an inordinate thirst for civil honors. I would advise that you plunge not too deeply into the political strifes of the day. By this, however, I do not mean that you shall decline to exercise your political rights; for the man who would, through weakness of character, pursue this groveling course, or from avarice would barter his invaluable rights for lucre, and thus disfranchise himself, will be sure to call down upon his head the well merited contempt of all political parties, and of every independent and honorable man. I would advise rather, that you thoroughly and carefully examine all the great questions that divide the great political parties of the day—all the great questions of national and state policy and government, and then go forth to the discharge of your duties, and the exercise of your political privileges, fearlessly, independently, and in the spirit and bearing of full grown men. Thus you will avoid the charge of extreme weakness and pusillanimity on the one hand, and all acrimony and partizan bitterness on the other—commanding the respect of all. Be not active partizans. Seek not the honors that may flow from civil distinctions, for they are inconsistent with a faithful discharge of your duties as physicians; but seek rather those honors which flow from professional and moral excellence.

A mistake which young men sometimes make, and will always make if they yield to the temptations which beset them, is in seeking, courting, and preferring the applause of the public, rather than that of their medical brethren. If this should happen to be your case, you will find too late, that in so doing you have committed an error, of which you will in later life bitterly

repent. The applause of the public may give you bread, but without the esteem and respect of your brethren it will not be likely to give you bread all the days of your life. If you are talented men and able physicians, your inclination and interest will lead you to a free and friendly intercourse with your professional brethren—will lead you to prefer the good opinions of the medical family, to the applause of those out of it, for they only are capable of duly appreciating your merit, and of doing you lasting honor.

Again, be not over anxious to commence business with an extensive practice, and a popular reputation. It is better that you begin with a small practice, and study, examine, compare, and investigate thoroughly what few cases you may have, and fix in your minds sound principles of practice. There is such a thing as a young man's having more business than he can do justice to, and more reputation than he can sustain. When this happens, the sick must necessarily suffer, while the physician must most inevitably fall. Be satisfied then, first to creep, then to walk, and when with the superstructure of a substantial reputation, you shall have laid your road to professional distinction, and accumulated enough of intellectual power, you may put on the steam, if you please, with little danger of being thrown from the track.

I congratulate you, gentlemen, that you enter upon business at a time when you will be beset by fewer temptations to the vice of intemperance, than were your predecessors. Formerly, when the free use of intoxicating drinks was fashionable, even in the best circles, the medical man in full practice was peculiarly tempted to an excessive use of them, and I regret to say, he too often yielded to the temptation, and became an inebriate. I say this not by way of reproach, for it is not surprising that so great a proportion of the practitioners of that day became intemperate; it is only strange that any escaped the foul embrace of the merry god, for the physician was a welcome guest in every family, and must be treated to a little good cheer wherever busi-

ness called him. But thanks to the temperance reformation, the tide of intemperance is arrested and rolled back. A brighter and a better day is dawning—this vice is now rendered unpopular, and physicians, as a body, are almost uniformly consistent temperance men, and are among the most devoted, able and efficient advocates and supporters of the temperance cause. The time is past, I trust, never to return, when the moral sense of the community will often be shocked by the sight of a tippling or drunken doctor. The time is past when a physician will be tolerated at the bed side, to puff into his patient's face the fumes of alcoholic drink, or the still more disgusting garlic effluvia of a drunkards breath. None are capable of doing so much good in this heaven born cause—none so potent for evil, as the physician. You will remember then, gentlemen, that you will, in some good degree, be responsible for the temperance character of that community with whom you shall take up your abode. I doubt not that you will esteem it no less a privilege than a duty to enter the arena, and wage a war of extermination against this fell destroyer and merciless foe of the human race. The monster is scotched, but not yet killed.

There are many other charitable, benevolent, and religious institutions, of a kindred character, that will claim your patronage and your support. In many of them you will be expected to lead, rather than to follow. If you have any doubts as to the extent of your obligations, daily recourse to the Scriptures of truth will set you right, make your duties plain, and the discharge of them a pleasure, rather than a burthen. Make then the Bible the man of your council and the meditation of you hearts—it will guide you into all truth, it will never mislead or deceive you. A strict observance of its holy precepts will fit and prepare you for extensive and varied usefulness in this life, and secure to you a blessed inheritance in that which is to come.

Go forth then, with cheerfulness and manly vigor, to the discharge of your every professional, moral and religious obligation, in the true spirit of philanthropy, in the spirit of christians,

and as good stewards who expect to render an account. In conclusion, gentlemen, it is the earnest wish of him who addresses you, that when you shall be compelled to surrender at discretion, to the foe, against whom you shall have been long contending, you may be able to look back upon a life devoted to the cause of humanity, a life well spent in the cause of benevolence and christian charity, and forward with full hope and confidence to a blessed immortality.

